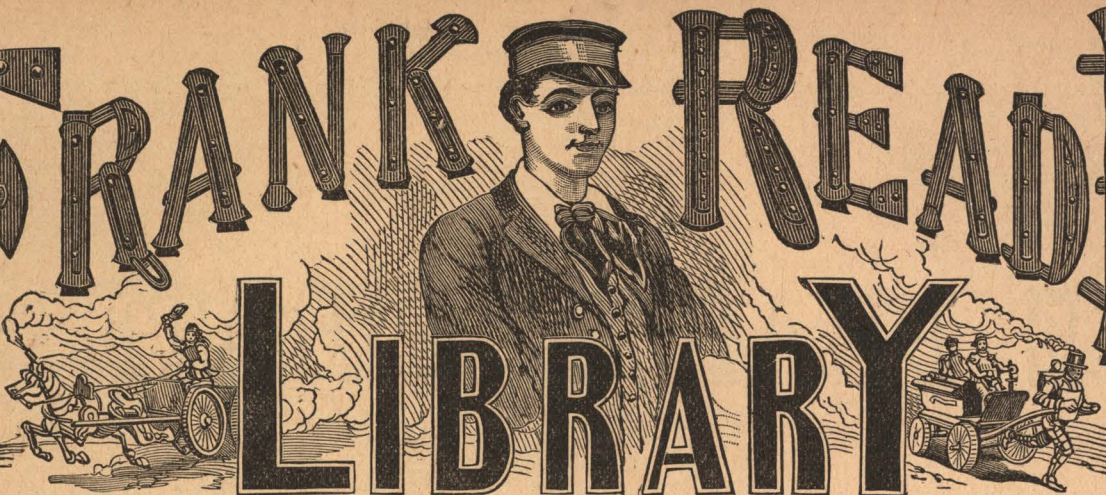


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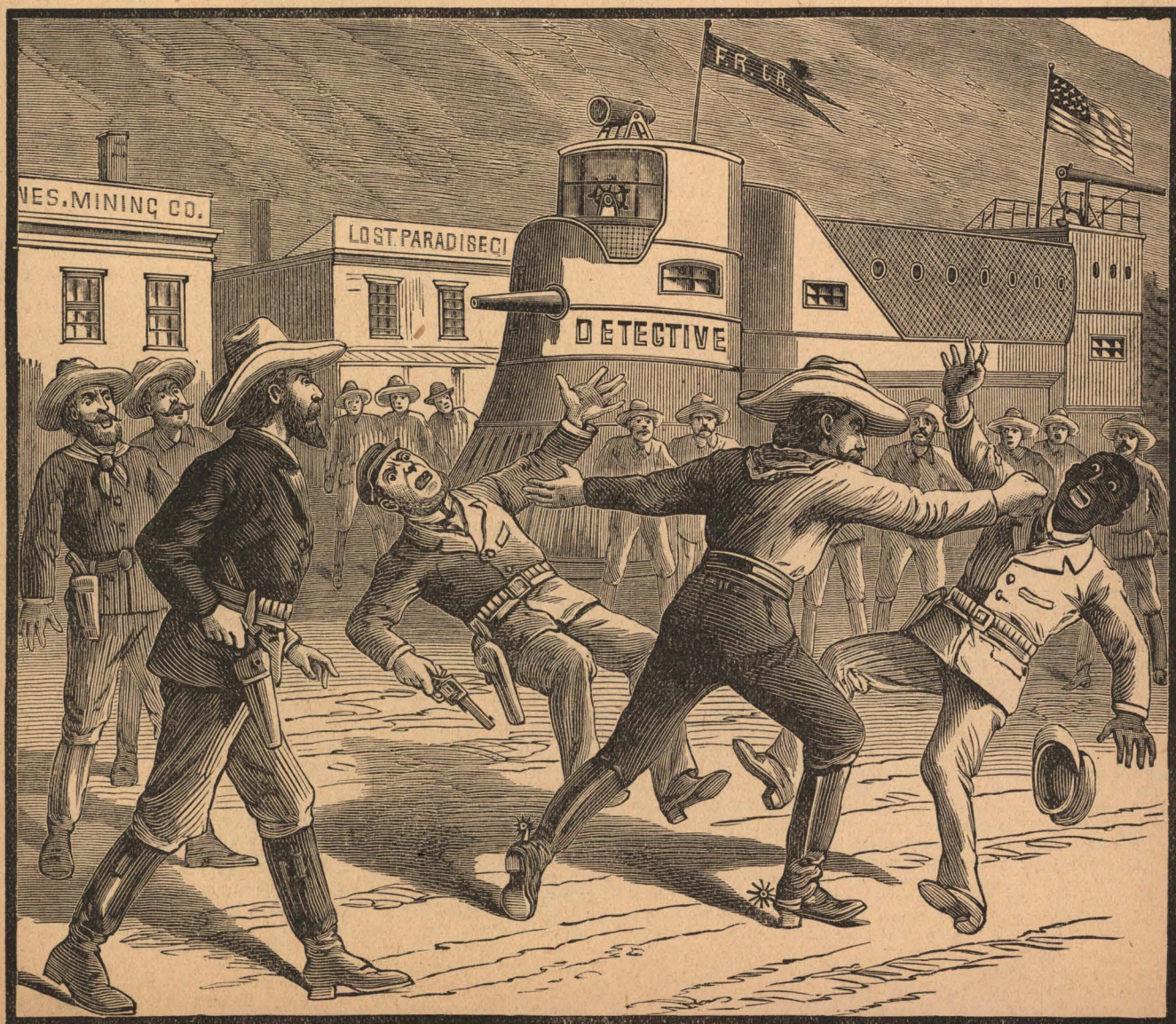
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The Prairie Pirates;

Or, Frank Reade, Jr.'s Trip to Texas With His Electric Vehicle, the "Detective."

By "NONAME."



But with the quickness of a lightning bolt, Rivera whirled and dealt Pomp a crushing blow on the jaw and hurled Barney aside like a puppet. Ere the two could recover he had made one mad leap and gained the back of a broncho tethered near.

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THE PRAIRIE PIRATES;

OR,

Frank Reade, Jr.'s Trip to Texas, With His Electric Vehicle, the "Detective."

AN EXCITING CHRONICLE OF DARING DEEDS.

By "NONAME,"

Author of "The Black Mogul," "Below the Sahara," "In White Latitudes," "The Lost Navigators," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE DETECTIVE'S STORY.

"THE James Boys never committed such atrocities as are placed at the credit of these Hinkley Brothers," declared Detective Jim Stuart, as he adjusted his quid and took a fresh chew. "Why, the West has never seen their equal. They are dare devils in everything, and so merciless in their dealings as the Apaches!"

He stood on the steps of the Southern Hotel in St. Louis as he uttered these words. Half a dozen men stood about as listeners, men who had faced danger in its most desperate form, typical frontiersmen.

"They are well called the Prairie Pirates," continued Stuart. "Why, the upper part of Texas is terrorized by them. They set even Uncle Sam's troops at defiance. Nothing can clean them out."

"How many do you reckon their gang consists of?" asked one of the party.

"I should say fully two hundred of the toughest scoundrels in the Southwest. Nobody but the Hinkley Brothers could keep such a set under subjection."

"But there ought to be a way to clean 'em out. Why don't the country about rise and make common cause against them?"

"Ah, my friend," said Stuart, with a smile, "that shows that you don't understand the situation at all. Texas is a mighty big territory and the ranches are scattered, there being sometimes fifty miles between them. It is hard to get all the herders and rancheros together for a sufficient length of time."

"What is the method of these desperadoes?"

"Their methods vary according to the work they have to do. If it is to loot and burn a ranch they are sure to descend upon it while the cowboys are out on the range. In holding up a train they are adepts. Their accomplices and colleagues lurk everywhere, and it is not safe to speak your mind in public, for many a rash man has been found with a knife between his shoulder blades, or a bullet in his brain."

"As for attacking them in their lair it will be no light task, for they find a hiding place in a deep range of almost impenetrable hills which it is almost impossible to safely invade."

Stuart's auditors one and all drew a deep breath. It could be seen that they were deeply impressed by his words.

"And yet," continued the detective, "I have been commissioned to invade the den of the Hinkley Brothers and rescue a young girl whom they abducted from her father's ranch a month ago. Her father is Colonel John Alden of the Double Star ranch, and he offers a reward of ten thousand dollars for her rescue."

"And are you going to undertake it?" asked one of the party.

"I am," replied the detective, firmly.

"Do you expect to succeed?"

"I hope to."

All were intensely interested in the detective's story. Indeed there were not wanting volunteers to assist him when it was known that a beautiful young girl was in durance vile.

Among the listeners to the detective's words was a tall, fine looking young man, with a distinguished air and a stamp out of the common.

After a while, as Stuart moved away, he walked quickly forward and overtook him.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but I was a listener just now to your story of the Hinkley Brothers."

"Ah," exclaimed Stuart, looking him over critically.

"Yes," replied the young man, "and I was much interested."

"Yes?"

"Particularly when you mentioned the name of John Alden who is a man of whom I have often heard."

The detective gave a start.

"Oh, you know Mr. Alden, do you?" he asked. "At least by reputation?"

"I do," replied the other. "If you were to hand him this card, he would know at once whom you referred to."

The detective took the card, and glanced at the name upon it.

"FRANK READE, JR.,

"READESTOWN, U. S. A."

He gave a start.

"Your name is familiar," he said. "Are you not an inventor?"

"I am," replied the other.

The detective looked at Frank Reade, Jr., for a moment in deep thought. Then a great light flashed across his face.

"By Jupiter!" he cried, "the Fates have sent you here to-day! If there is a man in the world who can bring the Hinkley Brothers to terms, I'll vow you are the man!"

"Do you think so?"

"I am sure of it. You are an inventor and a man of brains. If you will only co-operate with me, I will pledge my sacred word to bag the game within six months or less!"

Frank Reade, Jr., the famous young inventor, who was now the cynosure of all eyes, smiled and said politely:

"You speak confidently; yet the undertaking you have mentioned is a serious and a difficult one."

"Yet you can overcome all difficulties," cried the detective, eagerly; "only say the word. Will you help me? I will give you the lion's share of the reward, and—"

Frank made a slight gesture, which the detective understood. Then they moved away together, leaving the others out of earshot. They walked into a private room in the hotel and closed the door.

They did not come out for an hour. When they did appear, the

detective hustled out upon the street, while Frank Reade, Jr., went to the hotel counter and called for his bill.

"Going to leave us?" asked the affable clerk, in a perfunctory way.

"To-day," replied Frank. "Have my baggage at the first train for the East."

"All right, sir."

A few hours later the young inventor was in his berth on a Pullman car bound for Readestown. In due time he reached his destination.

Readestown was a smart little city among high hills, and upon a river which led down to the sea. It had been for a number of generations the home of the Reades.

The machine works where Frank perfected his inventions were near the river and were very extensive, consisting of a number of large shops and yards. On the day of his arrival in Readestown, Frank was driven to the works.

At the gate he was met by a comical little Irishman, who ducked his head and shouted:

"Shure, it's glad I am to see yez home wanst more, Misther Frank. An' did yez have a foine trip?"

"A very pleasant one, Barney!" replied the young inventor. "Where is Pomp?"

"The naygur, sor? Shure, he's ferniast the wather tank over there, a sorry place fer him. Whist!"

Barney let out a shrill whistle, and a jolly-looking coon came bounding into view. He turned a handspring at sight of Frank and came running up.

"Golly! I'se awful glad fo' to see yo' home once mo', Marse Frank."

"Very good, Pomp! Now I want you and Barney to get ready at once for a lively expedition to the southwest!"

"Whurroo!" shouted Barney.

"Golly!" gasped the coon. "When am we gwine to start, Marse Frank?"

"Just as soon as possible," replied the young inventor; "how is the new machine? Have you finished putting on the brasswork?"

"Shure we have, sor, an' she's as fit as a fiddle!" cried Barney; "wad yez loike to take a look at her, Misther Frank?"

"That I will!" replied Frank.

"Golly, Marse Frank. I'se curus to know wha' am de name youse gwine fo' to gib her?"

"Name?" exclaimed Frank. "Oh, we will call her the Detective!"

"Dat am a berry good name, sah!"

"A very appropriate one when you consider what sort of an expedition she is bound on."

"Phwat is that, sor?"

"To track down a gang of prairie pirates. One of our company will be the famous western detective, Jim Stuart!"

By this time they had reached the wide doors of one of the shops. Barney opened it and they entered.

Upon the level floor stood the latest triumph of Frank Reade, Jr.'s inventive genius, the electric vehicle, "Detective." For a moment the young inventor ran his critical eye over it.

Then he smiled his approval.

"You have done well, Barney and Pomp," he said. "She looks complete. Now I want you to get a car of the railroad company and pack her aboard it in sections. We shall go as far west as Fort Worth, Texas, by rail. From thence we shall strike overland into the Llano Estacado or the Staked Plains."

"All right, sor!" replied Barney. "We'll do all that, sor, at wanst."

Frank went back to the office and later sent a dispatch to St. Louis, as follows:

"JAMES STUART, Southern Hotel."

"Shall leave here by special train with the 'Detective,' on the 11th inst. You may expect us in St. Louis accordingly, and join us there for the trip to Texas.

FRANK READE, JR."

CHAPTER II.

IN TEXAS.

It might not be amiss at this juncture to take a look at the Detective, as completed and ready for the great western trip.

Frank's idea had been to construct a machine which could travel at a rapid rate of speed over a level surface of ground, and furnish a traveling abode for the purposes of exploration in any foreign country.

The Detective was able to move over any kind of ordinarily smooth surface at a tremendous rate of speed. She was also so constructed that she could ascend or descend hills with perfect ease and safety.

The body of the machine was long and narrow, and rested upon a running gear of strong and peculiar make. There were a series of springs, which were Frank's particular invention, and deadened the jolt or jar of the vehicle almost completely.

Four steel wheels with ball bearings and rubber tires were affixed to the strongest of axles. The motive power of the electric engines was furnished to the rear axle, the forward gear being made to revolve under the machine so that it could be guided by means of a wheel in the pilot house above.

At the rear part of the Detective was a steel walled structure called the main cabin. This was bullet proof and furnished with two windows, a door and several loopholes for defense. Over this cabin was

a small deck with a guard rail. On this deck was a swivel electric dynamite gun.

This was very light, being only a cylinder of steel with pneumatic air chambers for the expulsion of the projectile which exploded by impact. A shell could be thrown a mile with disastrous effect.

Forward was a smaller cabin and the pilot house. Through the steel prow of the machine there projected a second electric gun lighter than the other.

Between the main cabin and the pilot house was a section of steel netting in which were loopholes. The voyagers were safe behind this netting, for it was bullet-proof and in a warm climate it was excellent for the fact that a circulation of air was to be always had. Over the pilot house was a powerful electric search-light.

The Detective was primarily constructed with an eye to offense as well as defense. It was provided with the necessary requirements for travel in a perilous region, where there were wild beasts and savage men.

Provided with arms, ammunition and stores, the crew could live aboard the vehicle for an indefinite length of time, and with the deadly dynamite guns the Detective could hold a small army at bay on open ground.

With this invention, the latest effort of his genius, Frank Reade, Jr., was about to essay the invasion of the Pedro Hills and the stamping out of the lawless band known as the Prairie Pirates.

How he succeeded and what were his thrilling adventures will form the subject matter of this story.

When Jim Stuart, the detective, received the telegram from Frank Reade, Jr., quoted in a previous chapter, he was beside himself with joy. It is needless to say that he watched every day for the special train.

And finally it came rolling into St. Louis. Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp and the Detective were aboard.

It required but a few moments for Jim to join the party.

He was quickly introduced to Barney and Pomp, and they were at once friends.

"Golly!" declared Pomp when a short while later they were rolling away through Missouri en route for Texas, "dat detective am a berry nice gemmen. I reckon he hab got lots ob grit."

"Begorra, that's roight, naygur," agreed Barney.

And seldom it was that he did agree with Pomp.

For, while they were the warmest of friends, there was nothing each liked better than to nag or play practical jokes upon the other.

In this respect it was an even game between them.

The special train made a rapid run to Texas. Frank had selected Fort Worth as the best possible point from whence to start out into the wild region beyond the Llano Estacado, or where the Prairie Pirates held forth.

When Fort Worth was reached the special was side-tracked, and the voyagers began to disembark. The Detective was taken from the cars, and Barney and Pomp proceeded to put the sections together.

While thus engaged a large crowd collected, and with them came a tall, broad-shouldered Texan, who wore a wide sombrero and a distinguished air.

He came directly up to Frank Reade, Jr., and held out his hand.

"Welcome, strawnger. I reckon you're the sharp from the East what has come out here to help me run down the Hinkleys and find my gal Alice."

"I beg your pardon!" said Frank.

"Same here," replied the other in his off-hand way. "I'm Colonel John Alden of the Double Star Ranch. Most anybody will vouch for me in this town."

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Alden," said Frank. "I am Frank Reade, Jr. You are the very man I want to see. Did you anticipate our arrival?"

"I did," replied Alden, "and I'm ready to discuss matters with you at once."

At this moment Jim Stuart came rushing up and fairly embraced Alden.

"Well, this is luck! How did you get here, colonel?"

"Came all the way pony-back," replied Alden. "I have twenty of my best cowboys with me, and we're all ready to strike into the Pedro Hills with you."

"Good!" cried Jim. "You have made Mr. Reade's acquaintance?"

"Just now," replied the colonel, and Frank bowed. At once the three became the warmest of friends. Then Frank pointed out the details of the Electric Detective, as Barney and Pomp were putting it together.

The colonel was tremendously impressed.

"You say it is bullet proof?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Frank.

"Wall, by jingo! I don't see why you can't with perfect safety travel anywhere in them hills. How air they ever goin' to lick ye?"

"Well, they will have a hard job," laughed Frank. "Of course nothing is impossible; but we can give them a hard tussle."

"Well, you bet! But the more I look at you, the more you remind me of your father, who was a very particular friend of mine."

"Whoever was one of my father's friends, can count me the same," replied Frank.

"Well said! Your father died some years ago?"

"Yes."

"Well, he was a gentleman and a smart man. I've no doubt his

son takes after him. Now, my boy, do you know that we have undertaken a lively task?"

"I do not doubt it," replied Frank, "but that is just what I am looking for. I think we can hold our end up!"

"Gob bless you for coming away out here to help me," declared the colonel, earnestly. "You shall have your reward. It nearly broke my heart when they took my gal Alice away from me. If the black hounds have done her harm, I will consecrate my life to their destruction!"

"I think we may find her safe and sound!" replied Frank. "At least, we will make a mighty effort."

"Thank you, my boy!"

Then the colonel rode away to join his men and organize them for the great ride back to Paradise Lost, the little mining town at the base of the Pedro Hills, from whence they were to conduct their operations against the Hinkleys.

It would not be difficult for the machine to make its way very rapidly across that stretch of several hundreds of miles. But the ponies must, of course, go much slower.

However, Barney and Pomp soon had the Detective all in working order and ready for the start.

Then Colonel Alden and his men cantered up, twenty of them, mounted on game little ponies. Without unnecessary delay the start was made.

Out of Fort Worth the party dashed, and soon were upon the broad and level Texan plains. The ponies cantered on behind the Detective which bowled along smoothly.

It made quite an imposing little party, with the Detective and its dynamite guns leading the way. No wandering band of savages would hardly have ventured an attack.

Until nightfall they traveled, the distance made being fifty miles. This was a good starter. Camp was made on the banks of a small creek.

It was a beautiful evening and the moon rode high in the heavens. The cowboys turned their ponies out to graze and built a great campfire.

Frank and Jim Stuart and Alden sat on the forward deck of the Detective by the pilot house and smoked.

"Begorra," said Barney, "it looks koind av cheerful loike down there be that campfire."

"Dat am a fac', honey," replied Pomp. "Wha' yo' say to goin' down dere an' making ourselves agreeable? Might git acquainted, eh?"

"Be me sowl I'm wid yez, naygur! An' be way av diversion we moight take along a little bit av music fer thim. Phwat do yez say?"

"Ise wif you, chile."

Barney dived into the cabin and came out with a genuine Irish fiddle. The Celt could fairly make the instrument talk.

Pomp came out of the galley with a banjo, and cried:

"Hi dar, chile! I'se all ready. We gib dem chillun a chainece fo' to dance if dey wants ter!"

Down they went from the deck of the machine. In a few moments they had reached the camp fire.

The cowboys were engaged in telling some pretty blood-curdling yarns, but they looked up as Barney and Pomp appeared, and shouted:

"Wall, naow what's ercomin'? Great mustangs! if it ain't a reglar Pat!"

"An' a black nigger!"

"I say, boys, thar's fun fer us, fer they've got some music!"

This was the best possible card of introduction that Barney and Pomp could have had. It is needless to say that they were at once welcome.

And the clever assurance and ready wit of the two jokers soon made them bon comrades with all.

Barney played all manner of Irish jigs on his fiddle and sang Irish ballads to the immense entertainment of the cowboys.

Then Pomp put in the licks on his banjo and rendered some plantation songs that took the cake.

And thus the evening passed. It was a late hour when the party retired.

"Golly!" ejaculated Pomp as he crawled aboard the Detective, "dat was jes' a jolly good crowd ob gents, eh, I'ish?"

"Yez kin bet on that," agreed Barney. "Shure I'm in love wid Texas already, naygur!"

And indeed it might truly be said that the trip to Texas had really begun most auspiciously.

But the future held some events in store, which were destined to give the adventurers good reason to long remember the day they set forth from Fort Worth to attack the Hinkley gang in their mountain stronghold. And every day now they were drawing nearer to the scene of stirring events.

CHAPTER III.

THE FIGHT IN THE PASS.

A WEEK later the little party straggled through a line of timber and saw before them a rolling expanse of green plain. Far beyond it, against the horizon, a line of hills was visible.

Colonel John Alden rose in his saddle and made a sweeping motion with his hand.

"There are the Pedro Hills," he declared. "We are now on the stage trail to Paradise Lost. There is the ford over the creek yonder."

"And there is the stage!" cried Jim Stuart suddenly.

And sure enough there across the rolling plain in the distance was seen the yellow stage with its eight fleet mustangs flying under the lash of the whip to the relay station, a few miles further on.

The top of the stage carried armed men. Of late a gang of desperadoes had been holding up the vehicle in a pass just this side of Paradise Lost.

Many thought they were the Hinkleys, but of this none were certain. However, there was good ground for suspicion.

At once our adventurers were interested.

"Let us go over there and hail the stage," cried Colonel John.

"Perhaps they may help us in some way to locate the Hinkleys. What say ye?"

"Very good," agreed Frank. "Ride out on the trail, colonel."

The cowboys all gave rein and rode out on the trail. The stage began to pull up, and the armed men leveled their rifles.

But Alden rode forward with uplifted hand.

"All right, boys!" he shouted. "We are friends. You know me!"

"Colonel Alden!" exclaimed Brisco Jim, the driver, as he hurled the bronchos on their haunches. "What do ye want, colonel?"

"We want to know if you've seen anything of the Hinkleys on the way from the Forks?"

"Not a durned sign," replied Brisco. "Cluck—go lang!"

"Whoa—up! Wait a minute!" cried the colonel. "I see ye have a posse on deck, Jim. Do ye expect trouble before ye get to Paradise?"

"That's what we're lookin' fer, strawnger," said one of the posse. "If they hold up this stage, they'll run afoul of hot stuff!"

"I don't doubt it," replied the colonel, "yet you might get in over your depth and need help. Now we've got quite a party, and we're going down to Paradise, too. We'll come along after ye, and if ye git into trouble, we'll try and help ye out a bit."

"Thanks to ye, colonel," cried Brisco, cracking his whip. "So long to ye!"

The colonel turned and rode back to meet the Detective. Then the party kept on the trail to Paradise Lost.

The stage kept but a short distance ahead, and our party could easily have overtaken it, but made no effort, and thus they all approached the hills.

A black-looking gap loomed up in front of them. High walls of rock rose upon either side.

Beyond this pass was the mountain trail, which led down into the mining town of Paradise Lost, perhaps twenty miles beyond.

The stage reached the pass and disappeared into it. A few minutes later the Detective followed.

As the party in the rear had succeeded in getting into the pass, suddenly the sound of fire-arms was heard far ahead.

Instantly John Alden rose in his saddle and shouted:

"It's the road agents! They have set onto the stage. Come on, boys!"

With a cheer the cowboys swept up the defile. The Detective followed them.

They did not have to ride far ere they came full upon the scene of action. And a thrilling scene it was.

The stage had been attacked at a very narrow part of the pass. The mustangs were instantly shot down, as the road agents saw that resistance was meant.

Two of the armed guards lay dead on the deck. The others and the passengers had made a barricade of the coach, and were pluckily returning the fire of the bandits.

So that a hot fight was in progress when the reinforcements came up.

The road agents were well sheltered by an angle in the wall of the pass and a heap of boulders. Colonel Alden and his cowboys rode boldly up to the coach. Then they unslung their rifles and answered the fire.

This began to tell. The bandits, finding the place too hot for them, suddenly decamped. The victory was won.

The Detective had come up by this time behind the stage, and Frank had the dynamite gun all ready, but there was no occasion to make use of it.

Colonel Alden and his men came in for a great deal of praise. But the bluff colonel ignored this, and cried:

"The question is, how are ye going to get the stage down to Paradise? The mails are all safe, eh, Brisco?"

"Yes, sir," replied the stage driver. "Yew kin bet this is the time we fooled ther gang."

"Look here, Jim!"

"Wall?"

"Do you know who is the leader of this gang?"

"Dunno as I do; sometimes I've thought they was the Hinkleys."

"Well, I think so, too. I wish I knew it for certain."

Four of Alden's men agreed to give up their ponies to the stage and ride upon the vehicle themselves until Paradise was reached. Cheers were given them.

Then the stage was quickly equipped. It did not take long to change the harness. Then once more the stage was off on its way.

But as the Detective followed the party up the canyon, Barney, who was at the wheel, suddenly cried to Frank:

"Och, Misther Frank, wud yez cum here, sor?"

"What is the matter, Barney?" asked the young inventor, as he sprang into the pilot house.

Barney pointed to an object in a cleft of the cliffs near. It was a man with fierce, desperate features, cowering under a leaf of cacti.

He seemed to be unarmed and evidently desirous of escaping observation. But Frank gave the lever a sudden twist and brought the Detective to a stop.

"Phwat will yez do, Misther Frank?" asked Barney.

"Jump out there and bring him aboard," said the young inventor.

"Make a prisoner of him. He is one of the gang and perhaps we can get some valuable information out of him."

"Whurrool!" cried the Celt, "yez are roight, sor. Cum on, nay-gur."

"A capital idea!" cried Jim Stuart, drawing his Colt's revolver, "bring the fellow aboard!"

With Barney and Pomp the detective leaped overboard. They sprang into the cleft.

For a moment the outlaw was disposed to make resistance. But the sight of the pistol barrels subdued him.

He surrendered sullenly, and was led aboard the Detective which went on up the defile.

He was a powerful-framed fellow with a darkly-handsome but evil face. His shifting gaze took in everything about him.

He seemed surprised and interested in the vehicle aboard which he was, and stared at the electric keyboard in the pilot house as if trying to study out what it was.

Jim Stuart removed the fellow's sombrero and found a jagged scalp wound. A bullet had cut its way along the skull.

This doubtless had made the fellow insensible and explained his being left behind for dead by his comrades. After searching the prisoner's person, Stuart began to question him.

"What's your name?" he asked.

The outlaw showed his teeth like a wolf driven to bay and did not seem disposed to answer.

The detective drew a keen knife and placed the point at the villain's throat.

"Answer, you dog!" he gritted.

"Jose Rivera, noble senior!"

"Are you the leader of that gang?"

The fellow rolled his eyes.

"Jesu pity!" he replied. "I am only a poor follower. Antonio Gardo, he lead us!"

"Gardo!" exclaimed Stuart. "Oh, then you are all greasers, eh? Do you want to die?"

"Saints defend poor Jose! Have mercy, senior!"

"Then you shall tell us where is the hiding-place of your gang that we may ferret them out."

Something like a gleam of cunning flashed in the villain's eyes. He quickly replied:

"There be no hiding place, senior. Don Gardo he go everywhere. Camp here, camp there. No tell where to find him. Only hunt for him."

"Then he has no rendezvous?"

"None, senior."

Stuart went into the pilot house with Frank.

"Do you believe that wretch?" asked the young inventor.

"I think it more than likely that he speaks the truth," replied the detective. "I have heard that very same thing of Gardo. Well, it is of little use for us to waste our time hereabouts. We are after the Hinkleys."

"Right!" agreed Frank. "We cannot stop to trail down a lot of Greasers!"

"Just so."

"But—"

"What?"

"What will you do with this fellow?"

"Oh, take him down to Paradise and turn him over to the sheriff."

"Very good! He no doubt well merits hanging."

But as the Detective rolled on toward Paradise Lost the wretch began to beg and plead piteously for his life.

He promised all sorts of things.

He would give up a bandit's life—would be the Americans' slave, and so forth.

"Do not kill poor Jose," he pleaded. "I am not with Antonio Gardo of my own choice. Oh, holy saints defend me."

"Really, I'm half a mind to let the poor devil go free," said Frank.

"Wait till we get to Paradise and we'll give him a fair trial," said Jim Stuart. "If nobody proves anything against him, he shall go free."

The twenty mile trail to Paradise was covered without further incident.

The big yellow stage finally rolled down into the town, and the Detective and the cowboys followed.

A great sensation was created in Paradise when the party appeared. Never in its history had it witnessed the entry of any other vehicle but the yellow stage.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WARNING.

CONSEQUENTLY when the Detective appeared in their midst, the denizens were utterly dumfounded.

In all their career they had never seen anything like this curious horseless vehicle of the tenderfoots from the effete East. They came from all quarters to gaze upon it.

Paradise Lost was a typical mining town.

In the main it was little more than a collection of pine shanties. There was the long flume fed by the water from the gulch stream, and the big stamp mill of the Paradise Company.

Deep in the heart of the hills were sunk the shafts of the company. Here the red-shirted toilers were at work most of the time.

But besides this the gulch was crowded with shanties and claims of placer miners. On the arrival of the stage, or after the day's work was over, these men came from near and far into the town.

There was a frame hotel, with a wide and spacious lounging room. Here miner and sport, card sharp and tenderfoot, were to be found. There were gambling dens, and in fact all the other usual fixtures of the frontier town.

Twice a week the stage came in, bringing fresh arrivals and sometimes mails from the east.

When Jim Brisco reined the big stage up in front of "Brigham's" as the hotel was known, he let out a yell:

"Whoa!"

Then he sat still on the box, while the armed guards climbed down and the passengers alighted. Then the news of the hold-up spread.

Brisco Jim was obliged to recite an account of the whole affair from his high position. The excitement of the crowd was intense.

"And thar is ther tenderfoot rig what pulled us out of ther scrape!" he shouted, pointing to Colonel Alden and his men. "If it hadn't been for him, we mought not be here now!"

"Hurrah, hurrah!" yelled the crowd, and Colonel Alden gripped hands with a score of the brawny miners.

At this moment a man came lounging out of the hotel. He was a typical westerner, with revolvers stuck all around in his belt.

"How air ye, Stuart?" he cried, as the detective came along; "what air ye doin' in Paradise?"

"Keno Jim," exclaimed the detective, "you are just the man I want to see!"

"Eh?" exclaimed the other. "What can I do fer ye, Stuart?"

"We've got a fellow here in our team who I think is one of Antonio Gardo's men. We want to give him a fair trial! See?"

"Oh, yew want ter call a special meeting of ther district court, eh?" said Keno Jim, with a grim smile. "Wall, I'm lawyer, jedge, justice of the peace and everything else combined here. Bring up yer man!"

"Where will we hold the trial?"

"In Brigham's bar-room," said Keno, pulling out a big revolver. "I'll jest go over now an' clean it out!"

And with this he strode away.

Stuart knew well what Western justice was. Unless Jose Rivera could prove his innocence the hour would see him dangling from a mountain pine.

So he started back to the Detective. It required but a few moments for the crowd to get onto the fact that one of Gardo's men was about to be tried for his life in Brigham's.

The crowd at once made a rush for the bar-room of the hotel. Not half of them could get inside.

But the others waited without for the prisoner to come along.

As Stuart sprang aboard the Detective, he said to Frank:

"Now we'll dispose of this poor devil of a Greaser. If he tells a good story we'll let him off. If he don't—why, Judge Keno will settle accounts with him."

Barney and Pomp led the panic-stricken outlaw on deck. He begged piteously for his life.

So abject and groveling was he that his captors did not think it necessary to bind him.

Barney and Pomp on either side of him led him toward the hotel.

The crowd surged toward them to get a look at the outlaw.

Keno Jim himself came forward and when not ten yards distant gave a hoarse cry. The prisoner's gaze and his had met.

What followed took such an infinitesimal space of time and was so unexpected that none afterwards could recollect just how it happened.

But with the quickness of a lightning bolt, Rivera whirled and dealt Pomp a crushing blow on the jaw and hurled Barney aside like a puppet.

Ere the two could recover he had made one mad leap and gained the back of a broncho tethered near.

A dig at the animal's flanks, and it broke the tether and away it went like a thunderbolt down the gorge. Judge Keno fired four quick shots but none took effect.

The scene which followed baffled description.

Cowboys were instantly in pursuit. Shots were fired and a great hue and cry was made.

But they might as well have spared themselves the trouble. Rivera was not caught.

And an hour later the discomfited pursuers returned to the town.

Stuart was much put out and Barney and Pomp were frantic at what they considered their stupidity. But Frank Reade, Jr., was inclined to laugh until Colonel Alden came riding up excitedly.

"I say, boys," he cried, "do you know who that fellow really was?"

"Who?" asked Stuart, breathlessly.

"Keno Jim says he is Goff Hinkley himself!"

"Thunder!" exclaimed Stuart, and then gazed blankly at Frank. "Well, what fools we are! To have the game right in our hands and let it slip like that!"

That the supposed Greaser was indeed Goff Hinkley there was no doubt.

His clever yarn about Antonio Gardo was easily disproved by a number of Mexicans, who swore that Gardo and his gang were far

down on the Pecos river. This proved that the gang which held up the stage were really the Hinkley gang.

Excitement that night in Paradise Lost was at fever heat. The rough miners were quite carried away with the incidents of the day.

All sorts of heroic plans were discussed. When it became known that Frank Reade, Jr., had come with John Alden and his men to hunt down the Hinkley Brothers he became the hero of the hour.

And many of the bluff westerners went on board the Detective and inspected the electrical machinery. Keno Jim was particularly pleased, and as he was the autocrat of Paradise Lost, everything was smooth for the new-comers.

There was not the slightest clew, however, to guide the rescuers to the mountain stronghold of the Hinkleys, or as to the place of captivity of Alice Alden.

That night an excited meeting of the miners was held in the bar-room at Brighams.

Keno Jim officiated, and it was voted and decided that the Paradise vigilantes' twenty men should co-operate with Alden's cowboys and the Electric Detective.

A plan of operation was indorsed by Frank Reade, Jr., and was as follows:

As it was believed that the Hinkleys were in force in the Pedro Hills, Keno Jim and the vigilantes were to enter the hills from the south and Alden from the north, while the Detective made its way directly in through Calamity Pass.

In this manner it was hoped to force the fiends from their hiding place by surrounding them. Attacked from all sides, they would surely be driven to bay.

It was no light undertaking. Nor was it the first one.

Several times the invasion had been attempted in much the same manner and had failed. Many brave men had lost their lives.

The Hinkleys had proved almost invincible. So the miners knew what they had to face.

But this time they had the assistance of the Electric Detective and the dynamite guns. It was believed that this would count.

The next day all were awake at an early hour, and a startling surprise was in store.

On every cabin door, and even upon the rail of the Detective itself there hung a placard upon which was traced in letters of blood:

"Beware! The Doom of Paradise Lost Has Been Decreed!
"Fly While There is Time.

"Per Order
(Their X mark) "HINKLEY BROS."

Those of the timorous sort shuddered and muttered ominously. But Keno Jim put out a big card inscribed as follows:

"One Thousand Dollars Reward! For the Bodies of the Hinkley Bros.,
"Dead or Alive!

"Per Order
"PARADISE VIGILANTES,
"KENO JIM, Captain."

Matters were getting exciting indeed in the little mining town.

Knots of men gathered and discussed the situation in ominous tones.

Nobody felt safe for it was not known at what turn a foe might be encountered. The outlaws were known to lurk in disguise in every part of the town.

But preparations went on rapidly for the invasion of the hills. The Vigilantes armed to the teeth formed under Keno Jim, and the cowboys rallied under Colonel Alden.

There were many volunteers to go aboard the Detective.

But Frank said:

"We need no assistance. There are four of us with Mr. Stuart, and that is a sufficient number to efficiently protect the machine."

But there was one person who attached a deadly significance to the message of the Hinkleys.

This was Jim Stuart.

The detective's face wore an anxious expression, and he declared:

"It will be well for the people of Paradise to keep on their guard. There is trouble ahead."

CHAPTER V. THE WATER TRAIL.

FRANK READE, JR., was disposed to share the detective's fears.

"In what manner can they do harm to the town?" he asked. "Do you know of any particular opportunity?"

"I can think of none just now. But when the vigilantes are gone, and the place is practically defenseless, then lookout for the Hinkleys."

"But we must engage their attention in the meantime."

"You mean that we will try. We are by no means sure of succeeding. They are very slippery."

Frank could see the force of the detective's reasoning. But it was not easy to see how the plans could be changed to advantage.

So they were not changed. In a short while the vigilantes galloped out of the town to the south.

They were followed by the cheers of the denizens of the town. A few minutes later Colonel Alden and his cowboys struck out to the northward.

Then the Detective, with Frank Reade Jr., Barney and Pomp and Jim Stuart aboard, rolled out of the town. They went straight ahead for Calamity Pass.

This was about ten miles distant, and the real entrance to the Pedro Hills.

Beyond this pass they might quite reasonably expect to encounter the outlaws, if, indeed, the latter should stand their ground.

That their hiding-place could be found, there was no great certainty. The fastnesses of the hills were many, and it would be easy for such a band to find a retreat in some pocket or cave from which it would be almost impossible to dislodge them.

But Frank felt that if the lair of the outlaws could be found, much would be gained. He was sanguine of success.

The townspeople cheered the Detective heartily as it rolled out of the place. Soon it was threading the mountain trail.

Around the high mountain wall, down through gorges, over divides and at times following the brow of some deep canyon the trail led.

The scenery was wild and rugged like all of that on the New Mexico border. But there was no sign visible anywhere of human life.

The miner and the hunter seldom ventured into these hills.

They could tell great stories of the perils they held, while the superstitious Greasers and half-breeds counted them the abode of evil spirits.

And indeed there was very good reason for their fears.

For a more desolate, wild region the eye never rested upon. The most vivid description of the entrance to Hades could alone describe it.

Yet these hills were no doubt rich in minerals. No vegetation of any account grew there.

The soil was arid and useless, but in the beds of the creeks and gulches in the strata of the cliffs and the quartz ledges gold abounded.

All it awaited was the pick of the placer miner or the huge rollers of the stamp mill to yield untold wealth.

Years before this had been a favorite rendezvous or fortress of the wily and treacherous Apache.

Here he had held the white man at bay, and was not dislodged until starvation got in its work and retired him to the mesas farther west.

The sensations of our voyagers upon entering this gloomy region cannot be very well described.

There was a strange sense of mental depression, which was augmented by the sense of a deadly peril ever lurking near at hand.

The Detective made its way through Calamity Pass and came into a narrow, barren valley.

Here the machine was obliged to proceed slowly, as the ground was rough.

The voyagers were busily engaged scrutinizing every point near and far for some sign of the outlaws.

But not a thing was seen which would suggest their presence in the hills until suddenly the Detective came to a shallow stream.

Frank was preparing to ford this when Stuart clutched his arm.

"Wait a moment, Frank," he said.

"What is the matter?" asked the young inventor.

"Look down there in the sand! Do you see any footprints?"

There, in the sand, which extended to the water's edge, there were the prints of horses' hoofs. They extended into the stream.

"Horsemen have been this way," said Frank.

"Just so," agreed the detective. "Allow me to get down. I would much like to examine them."

The machine halted, and the detective went out on deck.

He sprang down into the sand and examined them. Then he inspected the shore carefully up and down stream for a hundred yards.

Next he waded across it and examined the opposite shore. He gave a sharp cry:

"It's just as I thought, Frank!" he cried.

"What?" asked Frank.

"This is a covered trail. They have gone up the stream, and the water has covered their trail."

The detective came over and clambered aboard the machine. He exchanged comprehensive glances with Frank.

"What is your theory?" asked the young inventor.

"There are several explanations," declared the detective; "first, it is possible that the outlaws heard us coming and have done this to throw us off the trail. In the next place it is not impossible that this stream is the hidden entrance to their stronghold."

"It is a clever trick," declared the young inventor, "and makes it easy for them to throw us off the track."

"Yet it is something gained. We have found their trail."

"Though a water trail."

"Still I think it can be followed."

"Let us try it!"

At once the plan was made. It was arranged that Frank should follow one bank of the stream and Jim Stuart the other.

While Barney and Pomp would follow in the rear with the machine. And thus the start was made.

Carefully Frank and Stuart made their way along the banks of the stream, looking cautiously for any sign of the foe.

Presently the level of a plateau was reached. Here it was pretty smooth going for the explorers.

But it also furnished a fearful set back for them. They paused in sheer disappointment.

For Frank suddenly came upon footprints at the waters' verge showing plainly that the outlaws had here left the stream.

But this was all.

It could not be pursued further. This was the end of the trail.

For the hard, flinty surface of the plateau left no mark whatever. The horsemen had cleverly eluded the trailers.

The pursuers were baffled.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Frank, "this is a hard one. What do you make of it, Stuart?"

"It means that we are beaten," declared the detective, "unless we can find the point at which this trail has left the plateau."

"Which will not be easy!"

"A random quest!"

"However, it seems to be our only recourse."

"Just so!"

So they went back aboard the machine. Barney, however, had an important bit of intelligence.

"Shure, Misther Frank," he said, mysteriously. "I think I can give yez a bit av information!"

"What is it?" asked Frank.

"While yez war lukin' along the bank of the creek there, sor, the naygur and meself kept a watch ahead, sor!"

"Well?"

"And ferninst that corner av the mountain, sor, we seen a queer flash of light!"

"A flash of light!"

"Yis, sor, an' mebbe av yez watch it long enough yez may see the same!"

Frank gazed in the direction indicated by the Celt. This was a high spur of the mountain about a mile distant.

"Kape yer eyes well on it, sor," declared the Celt; "loike enough yez will see it!"

Frank did as directed. Some moments elapsed.

Then he gave a start.

A blinding star of light appeared for an instant against the face wall of the cliff. The young inventor shouted to the detective.

"Come here, Stuart!" he cried.

In a moment the detective was by his side.

"Keep your eye on that angle of the mountain wall," said Frank.

"Ah, do you see it?"

Again the flash of light came. It was like an electric star. Once, twice, thrice it flashed. Then there was an interval and it flashed again.

"It is a signal."

"Done with a mirror."

"Yes."

The sun was in full glare in the noonday sky. There was no doubt but that this hypothesis of the signal was correct.

It was the common system employed by signal service men, the use of flashing mirrors. These signals were meant for some others of the foe lurking in another part of the region.

It proved several things, that the outlaws were apprised of the presence of the invaders and were in active communication.

It was not unlikely that they were preparing some sort of a reception for the enemy, and our voyagers realized that it would be well to be on the lookout.

"It means that they are well organized!" averred Frank; "they mean to defend themselves systematically!"

"Humph!" exclaimed Stuart, "let us once locate their stronghold and we'll give them all they want!"

"That must be our first end," said Frank; "suppose we make a line for that part of the mountain!"

"I have an idea!" said Stuart.

"What?"

"You told me of an electric needle rifle which you have. An arm of your own invention."

"Yes!" replied Frank.

"It will throw two miles or more, will it not?"

"Yes, but what of that?"

The detective glanced at the distant mountain angle.

CHAPTER VI.

A DARING ATTACK.

It is not more than a mile over there, is it?" he asked.

"I think not," replied the young inventor. "What of that?"

"Suppose we try a shot with the needle gun at that light, just to see what effect it will have!"

"Good!" agreed Frank; "it can do no harm."

And the young inventor dived into the forward cabin and soon appeared with the new gun. It was a very light affair, with a barrel about twice as long as the ordinary one.

Meanwhile the Detective had been slowly moving along over the plateau, and in the direction of the mountain.

Frank adjusted the needle gun and handed it to the detective.

Stuart took it and looked it over curiously. Then he raised it to his shoulder, saying:

"Here is for luck."

He took long and steady aim.

Suddenly the light flashed on the mountain wall again. The detective pressed the lever.

There was a hiss and a recoil, but no report. The long, thin, needle-like projectile left the barrel of the gun.

It seemed hardly an instant ere a distant flash of light and a sharp report was heard. The needle had exploded by impact.

At that distance it could not be seen what damage had been done. But the flash light signaling instantly ceased.

The machine now went forward at full speed.

The run across the plateau was made in a few moments. But a half mile of dense undergrowth extended to the mountain wall.

Through this the machine could hardly hope to force its way. Here was an unlooked for barrier.

However, Frank turned the head of the machine about so as to skirt it. In this way he kept along for a time.

And thus the machine was moving along when an unlooked for incident occurred.

Suddenly, from the thicket, there were thrown a half hundred circling lassoes. They came whistling through the air like so many angry serpents.

They fell upon all parts of the machine. Some caught about the pilot-house, over the forward fender, across the rail, and even in the wheels. Some fell short, but they were quickly thrown again.

The Detective was proceeding slowly, and the ropes which caught the wheels for the moment tugged them. The Detective was a captor.

Were it not for the entanglement of the wheels, the machine could have made broken strings of all the lariats. But as it was, the electric engines buzzed furiously, there was a spiteful grinding of the axles, and the machine came to a dead stop.

So sudden was the attack, that our voyagers were taken wholly by surprise, and knew not what to do. The lariats, as it transpired, were fastened to trees in the wood.

But following the lassoing of the machine, came the attack of the foe.

From the depths of the tangle came a legion of armed and masked men.

They were all attired in black and looked like demons. Straight for the deck of the Detective they came.

Only the sharpest kind of work saved the machine.

In an instant Frank shouted:

"Press lever No. 6, Barney!"

This was the electric connection which instantly closed and barred every door and window on board. So much for the defense.

It was done in the twinkling of an eye. Then Barney with a whoop grabbed his rifle.

"Whurroo! bad cess to the omadhouns! Give it to 'em, naygur!"

"I'se wif yo' honey!" cried Pomp, and both opened fire at the short-range upon the foe.

Just as fast as they could they fired the Winchesters through the loopholes. They could be easily seen through the netting by the masked outlaws.

Over the rail they came with the fury of wolves.

They tore at the netting, striking it with hatchets and knives and firing point blank against it.

But even their tremendous weight could not batter it in. Frank had constructed it for just such an exigency as the present.

It resisted every effort. Meanwhile Barney and Pomp were using revolvers through the loopholes with deadly effect.

The deck was becoming strewn with the dead and wounded outlaws. Some of them were trying to force the pilot house and cabin open.

Frank and Stuart were not idle either. Stuart was at the cabin loopholes, while Frank had gone down into the lower part of the vehicle where there was a trap door.

By lowering this he could lean out and unobserved cut at the lariats lashing the wheels.

In this way he was rapidly liberating the machine. He kept manfully at the task.

The outlaws had never thought of looking under the machine. Their attention was concentrated upon the upper part of the Detective.

So that Frank actually succeeded in freeing the wheels. This was all that was necessary.

He rushed back up to the pilot house. It was but a moment's work to turn on the dynamos.

Instantly the Detective gave a plunge forward. The other lariats snapped like thread, and the outlaws went down in heaps from the deck.

Clear of the struggling mass, the Detective struck up speed.

There were a score of the foe yet on deck, but they tumbled off unceremoniously, throwing their dead and wounded comrades over also.

Before the machine had gone a dozen yards the deck was clear. But the lever slipped, and she ran half a mile before Frank could check her.

He brought her about quickly and sprang to the dynamite gun. His purpose had been to throw shells among the outlaws.

But it was too late.

They had picked up their dead and wounded comrades and vanished.

When the Detective got back to the spot not one of them was in sight.

Frank threw a shell into the deep undergrowth. But it seemed to have no effect.

The first encounter with the outlaws of the Hinkley gang was ended, and was a signal victory for the Detective.

Jim Stuart was delighted.

"It was a regular Waterloo," he declared; "they'll hardly care to attack us again right away!"

"I almost wish that we had not experienced this encounter," said Frank.

"Why?"

"We have gained little and given them an idea of our strength. They will now be on their guard!"

"That may be true," agreed Jim, "but yet I cannot help feeling glad of the victory."

"Oh, certainly. It is much better than defeat."

"But where shall we strike now?"

"I would like to reach that mountain wall. But I don't see how we are going to get through all that tangle of undergrowth."

"It is impossible unless we may succeed in finding a path. But I have an idea."

"What is it?"

"Suppose we cut away to the northward here and make a detour of the whole mountain?"

"Approach it from the other side?"

"Yes."

"Very well," agreed Frank, "we will do that."

Accordingly the Detective was turned about and headed in the opposite direction. A clear course was found for a distance of ten miles.

Then a canyon was seen leading seemingly into the depth of the mountain fastnesses. There was some hesitation about entering this.

Frank did not wish to get into a trap which he knew was quite possible. The outlaws could perhaps get in a position to hurl huge boulders down upon the machine from the steep heights of the canyon on either side.

So he studied the situation very carefully. By this time darkness had begun to settle down.

Frank ran the machine out into the open plateau and turned on the search-light. This prevented any attack by stealth.

He had no intention of trying to work by night. He also had a double purpose in selecting this conspicuous position.

He knew that the outlaws would occupy most of their time watching the machine. While their attention was thus diverted the vigilantes under Keno Jim, and the cowboys under Colonel Alden, were closing in from separate quarters.

This ought to enable them to surprise the outlaws, or, at least, surround and besiege them.

So Frank was not anxious to push matters until another day. It was decided that the watch should be in pairs that night.

So Barney and Jim Stuart went on watch for the first part of the night. Frank and Pomp were to relieve them at about three o'clock.

The night was pitchy dark, and the rumbling of thunder in the western sky foreboded a storm. The wind sighed mournfully down through the pass.

Soon the lightning played vividly through the blackness, and then pattering drops of rain began to fall.

Barney and Stuart sought refuge in the cabin and the pilot house. Of course they could not keep a watch of the plain as well from here.

But it did not seem reasonable that the outlaws would make another attack that night. The search-light at intervals swept the plain.

Crouching in the pilot-house, Barney was keeping his eye upon the prairie in the flashes of lightning.

Suddenly he sprang up with a wild cry:

"Misther Frank! Misther Frank! For Hivven's sake, come quick, sor!"

Frank heard the call from the midst of his dreams. In an instant he was upon his feet.

He was dressed, so there was no delay in getting to the deck. Barney had brought the search-light to bear upon a scene far out on the storm swept plain.

And it was a scene which caused the blood of all to run cold.

CHAPTER VII.

THE QUICKSAND.

FAR out on the plain, a huddled body of men and horses were seen. They were advancing toward the machine.

But in the search-light's glare, realizing that they were discovered, they had come to a sudden halt.

Then to the front came a two wheeled carriage. It was a small cannon. The men could be seen unlimbering it.

Now, a shot from such a weapon might forever ruin the machinery of the Detective, and place its defenders at the mercy of the foe.

Frank knew this.

A sharp astonished cry burst from his lips. Then he made action.

He sprang to the dynamite gun, but before he could train it, a flash and a boom came from the blackness.

Then there was a rending and crashing of wood and steel, a buzzing and whirling of machinery.

"My soul," cried Frank, "we are hit!"

"Jericho!" exclaimed Stuart. "Who started her up?"

For the machine had really started and was speeding away over the plain. A second shot from the cannon was avoided, and Frank cried:

"Hold on, Barney. Don't get out of range. I want to give them a shot back!"

"Shure, sor, I haven't started the machine. I thought ye did it, sor!"

Frank sprang to the key-board. He turned the lever quickly to check the speed of the machine.

But in that act he was accorded a surprise. The machine did not abate its speed. It refused to obey the lever.

Again and again he tried it. Then he sprang down into the engine room.

The dynamos were buzzing fiendishly. A great hole was torn in the wall of the engine-room, and all connection with the key-board in the pilot-house was destroyed.

Nothing was visible but a jumbled mass of wires and debris. To

stop the machinery was only possible by finding the proper battery connections. Frank was for a moment dumfounded.

Meanwhile the machine was running wild across the plateau. Frank recalled the thrilling fact that the other side of the plateau was a fearful series of steep descents.

For the machine to plunge over those meant certain destruction, and it was headed that way.

Nor was it possible to change the Detective's course, for the steering apparatus was also mixed up in the debris. It was a frightful outlook.

Where had the outlaws procured the cannon? If their stronghold was defended with heavy guns, then its reduction was going to be a very serious matter.

Frank came back quickly to the cabin and communicated the state of affairs to the others.

"Really," he said, "I don't see what we are going to do. It is apparently impossible to check the machine."

"And to jump overboard would be death, going at this speed," declared Stuart.

"There is only one way to stop her that I can think of," said Frank.

"And that—"

"To smash the driving bars with a hammer. It would put her, I fear, beyond repair, and might make an end to our trip."

The detective hesitated.

"Is there no other way?"

"None that I can think of."

"Begorra, Misther Frank!" cried Barney as he rushed down from the deck where he had been using the search-light, "the edge of the plateau, sor, is only a mile away!"

"Then we must act!" said Frank, setting his lips firmly.

He picked up a heavy hammer and started for the lower part of the engine room. But before he reached there a great cry came from above.

Then there was a shock, a crash and dull splash. The engines hissed and creaked and stopped. The machine was at a standstill.

What had happened?

Frank rushed up into the cabin. It was dark.

Something covered the windows on the outside excluding the light. The others were up on the pilot house deck.

"Come up quick, Frank!" shouted Stuart. "We are safe for just now."

"What has happened?"

"Perhaps you can tell!"

Frank sprang up on the deck. The machine lay partly on her side. Her rear wheels and deck were below the level of the ground.

The search-light showed all as plain as day. Frank saw that a great mass of white sand lay about the rear end of the machine.

He reached over and took some of it up in his hands.

Then he exclaimed:

"By Jove, boys, it is from the frying pan into the fire. It is a quicksand!"

"Quicksand?" asked Stuart.

"Yes, or mire hole, as the Texans call it. They are quite common in this part of the country. Many a good steer has been lost in these treacherous spots, and even men and horses themselves."

"And begorra, it's ourselves as is in it now," cried Barney.

"Yes," agreed Frank, "and the next thing is to get out of it."

"Can we do that?" asked Jim, "in our present condition?"

"I fear not until our machinery is repaired. We must wait for daylight."

"But what if these outlaws come up again with their gun?"

"Turn out every light on board," commanded Frank. "In the darkness they'll hardly find us. These electric lights guide them easily."

The order was obeyed.

Then the voyagers retired to the cabin, for the storm had burst with terrible fury. The thunder and lightning was most appalling.

For hours it raged. If the outlaws were abroad in it they were certainly possessed of great hardihood. They did not appear to our adventurers in any case.

It seemed an age before daylight came. Then the sun came up hot and glaring to flash across the drenched landscape.

Just as soon as things about became clearly visible Frank and Stuart began to examine the position of the Detective.

It was not an encouraging one. The area of quicksand covered a hundred square yards. The machine had run into a narrow part of it.

Only the rear wheels and a part of the body of the vehicle were mired. But they were sunk deep in the treacherous stuff and there seemed no easy way of extricating them.

Certainly the engines were unable to do it.

"Well?" asked the detective after some while, "what is our best move, Frank?"

"First," decided the young inventor, "we must repair the machinery. After that is done we can decide what next to do."

They now went down into the cabin. Barney and Pomp had procured some plates of steel and were repairing the rent in the side of the machine.

Frank began to pick out the tangle of wires and soon had restored some sort of order out of chaos.

Very fortunately the storage tanks and dynamos were uninjured. All that was needed was to connect the wires and restore the key board.

The detective worked assiduously with Frank and in a couple of

hours the machine was all ready so far as the machinery was concerned.

Barney and Pomp had also succeeded in riveting the armor plates, and the Detective was intact once more. But now the question arose as to how it was to be got out of the quicksand.

And this was a problem.

But before it could be solved an unlooked for incident occurred. Suddenly Pomp pointed out over the plateau, and shouted:

"Golly, Marse Frank! Dere dey cum fo' all dey is wor! It am de debbils ob outlaws!"

This was seen to be the truth. Out on the level plain a great body of horsemen were seen and between their ranks was the field piece.

They had spied the machine and were coming toward it full bent. If they should once more succeed in getting within range it would be all up with the Detective and its voyagers. The cannon would quickly destroy it.

But Frank Reade, Jr., smiled in a grim fashion.

"We will hardly give them the chance this time," he muttered. "They must come to close quarters to do any harm, and before they get into range I think I can stop them."

He went to the forward gun and carefully trained it. He waited until he saw the cavalcade halt.

They came to a halt just behind a hummock in the plain. The cannon was in the act of being unlimbered.

Frank knelt down and carefully sighted the dynamite gun. Then he pressed the electric button.

Straight to the mark went the dynamite shell. It struck the hummock full and fair.

There was a tremendous upheaval of earth and debris. Men and horses were scattered, and the cannon was dismounted.

The outlaws scattered right and left. Frank sent shell after shell after them.

The fearful danger was averted, and it looked permanently. The cannon surely was of no further use.

"Good!" yelled Jim Stuart. "That is the way to treat them! We are saved!"

"Whurroo!" shouted Barney. "Now if the machine cud only travel how we cud give them a batin'!"

Pomp stood on his head with delight, and then went to wrestling with Barney.

But Frank stopped this.

"It is no time for fooling," he declared; "we must first of all get the machine out of this quicksand."

"Right!" cried Jim Stuart. "I suppose there is danger that she may settle deeper at any time."

"Certainly," replied Frank; "and the quicker we get her out the better."

"Then let us get to work. You must tell us what to do, Frank."

The young inventor went into the cabin and brought out a long and strong cable. This he carried to the Detective's rail.

CHAPTER VIII.

A GREAT VICTORY.

It was no easy matter to get off the deck of the machine down upon level ground. The quicksand was very treacherous.

But by putting out a ladder forward, Barney and Frank succeeded in getting out upon terra firma.

They carried one end of the cable and a strong chain to a sycamore tree, about fifty yards away.

Frank placed the chain about the trunk of the tree, and then placed a strong pulley block against it. This made a double line of the cable to the machine and back.

The cable on the machine was placed about the forward axle. As it was turned by the engines the cable should wind up, and thus exert a powerful pressure to pull the machine out of the sand.

It was a clever arrangement, and Frank fancied that he might thus be able to pull the machine out. So he went into the pilot-house and started the engines.

The big rope tautened and creaked with the immense strain. Then slowly the machine began to yield.

But Frank saw at once that this would not do.

The rear wheels acted as a sort of an anchor, and held the machine firmly where it was. The strain was breaking it in two.

So he shut off the power.

"What's the matter?" asked Jim Stuart, from forward, where he had been watching operations.

"Matter enough," replied Frank; "it won't work, that's all!"

"But why not?"

"Easy enough. The strain will break the machine in two!"

"Do you believe it?"

"Yes."

The detective was keenly disappointed. He knew that it was losing valuable time.

He swept the horizon with his gaze. The outlaws had all disappeared. Not one was in sight.

"Well, he said finally with a tinge of impatience. "What shall we do about it?"

"I have one other plan," said Frank, "if that does not work, then I fear we shall have to abandon the machine!"

A gloom fell upon all. They watched Frank's next move closely.

The young inventor went down into the lower part of the vehicle.

The trucks of the Detective could be severed from the main body of the machine by disconnecting certain bolts and nuts.

Frank's new plan was to disconnect the rear truck.

This would dispose of the anchor. This would enable the forward part of the machine to be dragged safely onto terra firma.

But what Frank most feared was that the rear trucks would then sink out of sight and reach in the quicksand. He tried to think of some plan to avoid this contingency.

Carefully he studied the situation. Finally an idea occurred to him.

He procured an extra cable and fastened it to the rear truck. This was carried to another tree directly opposite the sycamore. Then Frank disconnected the truck from the main body of the machine.

Again he returned to the pilot house and turned on the power. The great ropes strained and creaked.

The Detective gently and slowly slid from the quicksand and out upon terra firma. Instantly all eyes were turned upon the trucks left behind.

"Hurrah!" cried Jim Stuart.

They did not sink in the mire as had been feared. Instead they remained in exactly the same position.

This was indeed a matter of joy. Quickly the rope from the trucks was connected with the rear axle of the machine and they were dragged easily out of the sand.

The Detective was safe.

The voyagers were so delighted that they cheered wildly and frantically.

Barney and Pomp at once set to work cleaning the truck and then it was placed back under the machine, which was now little the worse for the experience.

The cables were taken in and once more all was ready for the fray. At once Frank set a course back for the hills.

In a short while they were once more near at hand. But no trace of the outlaws could be seen.

For several hours the Detective ran on to the northward. Then they began to make a turning of the mountain wall.

And this brought them suddenly into a region the like of which none of them had ever before seen.

It was akin to the famous Bad Lands of Dakota, there being all manner of strange shaped rocks and earthy formations. Among these the machine picked its way.

Suddenly Jim Stuart, who was on the upper deck, shouted to Frank:

"Come up here quick!"

The young inventor sprang up beside the detective.

"Listen," said the latter.

But already Frank heard startling sounds coming from the westward. They were dull and faint, yet recognizable.

"There is a fight going on over there," declared Stuart.

"You are right," agreed Frank, excitedly. "Do you think it can be Alden?"

"More likely the vigilantes; perhaps both of them."

"At any rate it means that they have hit upon the gang and are making things lively," declared Frank.

"Right you are. Ought we not to make an investigation?"

"Certainly."

Frank at once changed the course of the Detective. All speed was put on.

It was, however, not easy to proceed with the greatest speed among the rocks of the region. But yet the sounds of conflict drew nearer.

The rapid fire of guns, and the yells of the combatants were plainly heard. Nearer the machine drew.

Then suddenly it ran out into an open clearing at the base of a high cliff. A fringe of trees and rocks occupied the lower edge of this clearing.

Here both bodies of men, the vigilantes and the cowboys, were stationed under cover and keeping up a hot fire on the cliff above.

Out from the cliff jutted a rocky table one hundred feet above, and back of this was seen the entrance to a big cavern extending back into the hills.

Here the outlaws were skulking and hotly fusillading those below.

There were steps cut in the face of the cliff for an ascent, but to have attempted such a thing in the face of the hot fire from above would have been sure death.

But the outlaws' den had at last been found. This was one great object accomplished.

And as the Detective appeared on the scene a mighty cheer went up from the vigilantes and cowboys. Their spirits went up one hundred per cent.

"We got here just in the nick of time," cried Stuart; "let's go over and see Alden and Keno Jim!"

The Detective was the recipient of a hot fire from the cliff above, but the bullets did no harm.

Once back of the cover of rocks, Alden and Keno Jim sprang aboard. It was a joyful meeting.

Mutual experiences were recounted. Then Alden exclaimed:

"I think that Alice is somewhere confined up in that place. If we could only get up there——"

"We can," said Frank.

"How?"

"I will show you. Have your men ready for a charge. I will send a dynamite shell up there and clean the cavern's mouth of those rascals. Then you can send your men up there safely."

And Frank proceeded to carry out this plan.

He sighted the dynamite gun and sent a shell up into the mouth of the cavern. It exploded with terrific effect.

A great section of the ledge came tumbling down. Not an outlaw was to be seen after the explosion.

With a cheer, the cowboys, led by Colonel Alden, rushed to the attack.

Up the face of the cliff they swarmed like bees.

A few moments later they were in the mouth of the cavern, and then the fighting began.

The Vigilantes followed. Into the cavern they charged.

The outlaws were driven back before such an overwhelming force. They fled into the furthest depths of the cavern, and soon not one of them was to be found.

Colonel Alden was victoriously leading his men through one of the passages when a feminine scream reached his ears.

He turned as if with an inspiration and threw his weight against a wooden partition across one corner of the cave. It gave way.

He dashed into a square chamber rudely furnished. It had but one occupant—a young girl with pallid face.

"Alice!" he cried. "Thank God, you are safe!"

The next moment Alice Alden was clasped safely in her father's arms. It was a happy meeting.

To every part of the outlaws' stronghold the victorious invaders penetrated. The very ease of their victory made them over confident.

The outlaws had incontinently fled. Not a trace of them could be found anywhere.

There were heaps of plunder and stores in the great cavern. The victors proceeded to overhaul the spoils.

But Colonel Alden, with Alice, went back down to the base of the cliff and aboard the Detective.

Frank at once gave the young girl a stateroom on board the machine.

"She will be safe now!" declared Colonel Alden; "oh! this is the happiest moment of my life!"

Thus far the expedition had been a grand success.

"But I can't understand why the Hinkleys didn't make a harder fight," said Stuart, in surprise. "Can it be possible that we have broken up this hard gang so easily?"

"Ah! they may be planning some big coup!" declared the colonel; "it is well for us to keep an eye out."

"You are right!" said Frank; "we are not done with them yet!"

"But what will be their next move?" asked Stuart.

"That we can hardly tell," replied Frank; "but rest assured we shall hear from them again."

By this time the day began to come to a close. There seemed no way but to spend the night on the spot.

CHAPTER IX.

A COUNTER MOVE.

So preparations were made for a camp.

The Vigilantes and cowboys were content to rest in the cavern, where they found many good things to eat and drink, but Colonel Alden was to stay aboard the Detective.

Thus the night was passed.

When daylight came again, a consultation was held as to what it was best to do.

Finally it was decided to continue the scouring of the hills for the outlaws.

"If we can only deal them a death blow now," declared the colonel, "we will effectually dispose of the worst curse this part of the country has ever known."

"It can be done," said Jim Stuart. "I tell you we did a big thing when we got Frank Reade, Jr., to enlist with us!"

"That is right!"

Frank smiled and bowed his acknowledgment of the compliment.

"You do me too much credit," he said. "I am not entitled to it!"

So the cowboys and Vigilantes set forth to scour the hills. The Detective followed slowly in their wake.

Thus two days were consumed. But search as they would not a trace of the Hinkleys could be found.

This was curious enough.

What had become of them?

There seemed but two logical conclusions easy to arrive at.

One was that the gang had abandoned the hills and gone farther west. The other was that they had some hiding place which could not be found.

However, the quest proved vain and fruitless, so that at length it was decided to return to Paradise and abandon the search.

It was believed that a blow had been dealt the gang which would prove permanent, and that they would henceforth shun the region about.

So the Vigilantes and cowboys formed ranks and rode away back towards Paradise.

The Detective followed leisurely, and the Pedro Hills had begun to sink below the horizon when an unlooked-for and startling incident occurred.

Far in the distance in the direction of Paradise a great cloud of smoke was seen mounting into the sky.

Even at that distance of eight or more miles the glare of flames could be seen. It could hardly be mistaken for a forest fire, for the trees were not dense enough in that locality.

Colonel Alden rode excitedly back to the Detective where Frank and Stuart with their glasses were studying the scene.

"What do you think of it?" asked the colonel, anxiously.

"It looks as if something was going on over there," declared Frank.

"Something is wrong at Paradise," cried Stuart. "We ought to push ahead faster!"

"What can have happened?"

Then the three men exchanged glances. The same thought was in the mind of each.

Did this show the malicious revenge of the Hinkleys? Was their warning posted on every door in Paradise after all a literal one?

A grim look came into the eyes of the three men. It was not necessary for Frank to say:

"Forward, with all speed!"

The horsemen gave their mustangs full rein.

The Detective went forward with full speed.

It could run faster than the horses, of course, and soon had outstripped them.

Minute after minute sped by.

And now a single horseman was seen galloping like mad from the direction of Paradise.

As he drew nearer it could be seen that he was half lying over the pommel of his saddle as if exhausted.

Nearer he drew.

Then, as he came up alongside the Detective, it could be seen that he was covered with blood. One shoulder had been shot through.

He was half fainting from loss of blood.

"It is Tom Melton!" cried the detective. "Hey, Tom, what is wrong?"

"The Hinkleys!" gasped the wounded man; "they have attacked Paradise! Half of it is in flames! For the love of heaven go to their help!"

The Detective stopped just long enough to take the wounded courier aboard. Then away it sped.

Frank took the wheel.

That ride down into Paradise none on board ever forgot. Down steep descents, through gorges and canyons, around precipice walls the machine sped like a meteor.

Now the fearful scene came plainly to view.

Far below in the little mining valley the town seemed to be in flames. The crack of firearms and yells of combatants could be heard.

It was plain that the small number of men left in Paradise were defending the place with their lives.

Frank set his teeth and sent the Detective down the mountain trail. Had he reached the town he would quickly have turned the tables.

But a catastrophe completely upset all plans.

The trail suddenly narrowed. The machine was going at fearful speed.

There was not time for Frank to check the machine, though he set the brakes hard.

A great boulder had slid down into the trail.

The next moment the Detective slipped and slid and grazed it. A little more room and it would have been all right.

But there was just enough of a collision to tilt the machine over. Then she plunged into the opposite bank.

Frank tried to back her out, but the engines would not answer. It was easy to see that they were again out of order.

Appalled, all exchanged glances. It was a bitter moment.

"My soul!" exclaimed Stuart; "we can do nothing to help them."

"Then Paradise is doomed!" groaned the wounded courier.

"No," said Frank, resolutely; "we must go to the rescue ourselves."

"And leave the machine?"

"Leave it."

"But—"

"Well?"

"Will that be safe?"

"Pomp will stay aboard and guard it. With the dynamite gun he will be all right."

The detective could say no more.

"Well," he said, "you know best, Frank. You are the commander."

No time, however, was to be lost. Barney and Stuart and Frank, with rifles, left the machine.

Pomp and Melton and Alice Alden were left aboard the Detective. The dinky at once began work on the repairing of the engines.

"Mebbe I kin git dem fixed afo' Marse Frank comes back," said the coon. "Yo' kin bet I'll try it pretty hard."

Down the trail the three plucky men rushed. They had just reached the outskirts of the settlement when Alden and Keno Jim, with their men, came thundering behind.

It was a fearful scene which met the gaze of all.

It seemed more like the work of fiendish Apaches than of white men.

The ground was strewn with corpses of men, women and children. It was an attack of extermination with the Hinkley gang.

It made the blood of every man in the rescuing party fairly boil. With white set faces they rushed to the rescue.

On one side of the flume every cabin had been fired. On the other side the desperate miners had gathered in Brigham's hotel with their families and were fighting for their lives.

The relief came none too soon.

The outlaws were pressing hard against the doors of the building and were just about to put the torch to it.

But when they heard the avenging cry of the returning Vigilantes, they melted from sight like mist before the warming sun.

In a few moments not one of them was in sight. The darkness of the gorge swallowed them up.

In their black suits and masks they looked like veritable demons, which in practice they were.

The infuriated Vigilantes pursued them savagely. But as usual they gave their pursuers the slip.

The state of affairs in Paradise Lost was deplorable in the extreme.

As soon as the burning embers were extinguished and the dead and wounded cared for, a meeting was called at Brigham's Hotel.

These miner and tenderfoot, gambler and hunter, trapper and half-breed, even the Chinamen took a solemn oath to pursue the Hinkley gang until not one was left alive.

"I can tell you, gentlemen," declared John Alden, confidently, "that if Mr. Reade, Jr., had not suffered an accident to his machine coming down the trail he would have wiped out a few of the dogs."

"You are right," cried Jim Stuart, "and we must enlist his services in the hunt!"

A great cheer went up. A speech was called for and Frank was obliged to respond.

He promised generously to aid the Paradise people in bringing the villainous gang to justice. And then the meeting dissolved.

Colonel Alden embraced Frank effusively, and offered him the Double Star Ranch and all he had in the world, as a recompense for his services in rescuing Alice.

But Frank modestly declined any reward, saying:

"I am in Texas for my own diversion, and I ask no pay for performing what was to me an actual pleasure."

"Now, let us go back and see how the Detective is," said Stuart.

"She must be repaired."

"Oh, that will not be difficult," said Frank. "It is not impossible that Pomp has her fixed all right now!"

At this moment Barney gave a great shout.

"Sare, Mистер Frank," he cried, "there cums the machine now, and the naygur is in the pilot house!"

This was the truth.

CHAPTER X.

ENTRAPPED.

THE Detective was rolling down into the little town and Pomp was at the wheel.

The darky had kept persistently at work after his companions left him, and had actually succeeded in repairing the delicate machinery and getting the Detective out of the sand bank.

Melton, the wounded courier, and even Alice Alden, had assisted him to the best of their ability.

To say that our voyagers were overjoyed at sight of the machine once more intact would be a mild statement.

They rushed forward to meet it and were quickly on board. Then Melton was taken in charge by his friends and Alice Alden by her happy father.

Comfortable quarters were secured at the Brigham for the colonel and his daughter, for Alden was determined not to return to his ranch until the Hinkley gang had met with utter extermination.

The next day bands of men scoured the mountains for miles about. The Detective went over every trail within fifty miles.

But not a trace of the Hinkleys was to be found.

If they were in hiding near they were certainly exceedingly clever in keeping so close.

Thus a week passed.

Then an unexpected clew was gained. An eastern stage brought in a wounded man found out on the trail not a dozen miles from Paradise.

He was recognized as one of the Hinkley gang, and made a dying confession.

He declared that the gang had moved one hundred miles further south and had laid a plan to hold up a treasure train on the Texas Central Railroad.

The details of the nefarious project were obtained. Then a consultation was held as to what it was best to do.

Of course it was proper to send word to the railroad company. But there was no telegraph and a stage would not reach there in time.

Nor would the best horseman in the town either.

In this state of affairs someone mentioned the Electric Detective.

Frank at once stepped forward and said:

"You may count on me. I will take the message and endeavor to prevent the hold-up."

A great cheer went up. The crowd gathered about the young inventor, who was the hero of the hour.

"When can you start, Mr. Reade?" asked Tom Brigham.

"Within ten minutes."

The air was rent with cheers.

As Frank promised, ten minutes later the Detective was en route for China City, where the Hinkley gang were expected to meet.

Out of Paradise rolled the machine and quickly climbed the mountain trail.

Down on the other side of the divide she rolled and came out upon the great plain, extending all the way to the railroad.

It was clear sailing and Frank gave the machine its head.

"One hundred miles!" he said. "It is now eleven o'clock A. M. We will be in China City at dark."

"Whew!" exclaimed Jim Stuart, "that is fast going!"

"Well, you shall see!"

The machine fairly flew over the plain. Twenty miles an hour was an easy clip.

But, of course, there were some delays. There were detours about swamps and the fording of streams.

But just as the sun sank upon the horizon Barney gave a shout.

"Shure, sor, there be the tillygraph poles!" he cried; "it's the railroad!"

And this was the truth.

The railroad was indeed in sight. All were upon the qui vive.

Just to the south there was a deep pass between rocky hills. Ten miles in the heart of these hills the hold-up was to occur.

Frank ran down to the side of the railroad track and then a conference was held.

It was finally decided to wait for the cover of darkness and surprise the outlaws in the very act.

Their plot was to blow up a bridge over a creek with dynamite. The train would be compelled to stop and then they would board it.

The creek was some distance into the hills. As the train did not come along until an hour before midnight, it was deemed not best to enter the hills yet.

They would of course run less danger of being seen after dark than in daylight. So the Detective ran into a clump of trees and waited for darkness.

Then it emerged and began to creep slowly along through the defiles. Frank and Stuart with rifles walked along slowly, picking out the way while the machine followed.

In this manner they proceeded cautiously, and as they believed unseen, into the enemy's country. Steadily they kept on and reached a small height near the bridge at a little before ten.

Here the machine rested, with its guns pointed toward the bridge. Frank's plan was simple.

It was merely to turn the search-light upon the villains as they attempted to board the train, and then send a bomb into their midst.

Rather a harsh remedy, but such a disease required drastic treatment, as Stuart said.

They were delighted at having gained so slightly an elevation, and were sure of giving the foe a keen surprise.

"Bejabers, they'll be afther thinkin' the world is comin' to an ind," declared Barney.

In the gloom, dim forms could be seen working at the bridge. The outlaws were laying their train of dynamite.

Frank and Stuart even ventured to descend almost to a point from whence they could easily see them.

The time was now growing short. Everybody was upon the qui vive.

Frank was at the electric gun. Stuart was at the forward rail, and Barney and Pomp at the search-light, ready to turn it on at the word of command.

Thus matters were when the distant whistle of the train was heard. Then far down the track its headlight showed.

The supreme moment had come.

Every nerve was strained. But while all were intently watching the train they did not see a number of shadowy forms climbing silently over the rail in their rear.

Suddenly the train whistled. Then there was a great roar and a volcanic burst of flame from the bridge below.

The next instant it was in the air. The shrill shriek of distress and warning from the locomotive followed.

Then it came to a stop not many yards from the end of the destroyed bridge.

At the same moment a great fire blazed up from the side of the track, showing all as plain as day.

And armed men went rushing up to the locomotive cab. The hold-up was complete.

Where was the sequel so carefully planned by our friends? It was not enacted.

Frank had given the word.

"Now!"

Then he had sprung forward to discharge the electric gun. But a powerful arm was thrown about his neck, and he was flung to the deck. Jim Stuart shared his fate.

Barney was instantly in the clutches of half a dozen armed men, as was Pomp.

"Yield or you die!" was the stern command.

In face of such odds resistance was sheer madness. In the twinkling of an eye they were bound and prisoners.

Such a turning of tables was most astounding. Our adventurers were hardly able to realize their misfortune.

Meanwhile, others of the outlaws with lanterns, surged on board. Their exultation was great.

And the train robbery down below was made complete. The guard in the treasure car attempted some resistance, but were quickly shot.

The treasure chests, with one hundred thousand dollars in gold and bank notes, were taken out of the car and blown open, and the spoils divided.

Then the terrified engineer was allowed to back his train away and cut out for the nearest station back on the line.

The train robbers were wildly delighted with the success of the affair.

All now came crowding about the machine. They began to overhaul it, to Frank's dismay.

All went well until they reached the engine room.

Then one of the greenhorns placed a hand unwittingly upon a live dynamo.

He was killed as if with a lightning bolt.

Astounded, one of his companions picked up an iron bar and touched the dynamo.

He was knocked senseless, the bar knocking three others down with its ecstatic kick.

The dead man was carried out, and the death dealing part of the machinery was regarded with awe.

Then the villainous crew began to plunder the stores, and, in fact, possessed themselves with everything of value aboard the machine.

"Great Scott!" groaned Stuart, as he lay beside Frank in the forward cabin, "this is the worst misfortune we have had yet. It is our ruin!"

"I am not so sure of that," said the young inventor; "if I could only get one hand free I would soon fix these black rascals!"

They were at the moment reclining in deep shadow. Only one man was acting as guard near them.

Frank had been patiently working on his bonds until he nearly had them free. As the detective realized this he whispered:

"Roll a bit nearer to me. I believe I can cut your bonds with my teeth."

"All right!"

In a few moments the detective's splendid white teeth were doing their best to rend the bit of rope. And he succeeded most admirably.

In a short while Frank's hands were free. The young inventor partly sat up with a thrill of joy.

But at that moment a startling thing happened.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PURSUIT.

INTO the cabin strode a tall, dashing fellow with dark features and flashing black eyes. He wore a complete suit of black velvet.

"Jericho!" whispered Stuart, "that is Tad Hinkley!"

It was indeed the younger of the famous Hinkley brothers. He was noted for his dare devil bravery.

He flashed a glance at the prisoners and said to the guard:

"Keep an eye on those fellows until sunrise. Then take them out and shoot them!"

"All right, sir!" replied the guard.

Then with a contemptuous glance at the prisoners again the villain was gone. Stuart shrugged his shoulders.

But Frank muttered:

"They may not have a chance to shoot us at sunrise!"

"What is your plan, Frank?" asked the detective.

"Keep quiet and I'll show you!"

They were lying but a few feet from the door of the pilot house. As it chanced nobody was in it.

Frank braced himself a moment, then sprung up and like a flash bounded into the place. The guard turned, but he was not quick enough.

He fired, but Frank had swung the steel door shut behind him. He shut the bolt, then placed his hand on the keyboard.

His plan of action was quickly outlined.

First he pressed the motor lever and the machine bounded forward at full speed. Then he turned on the electric search-light.

The astounded outlaws were taken completely by surprise. Those in the cabin rushed out on deck. Instantly Frank pressed a lever which closed every door.

Down the hillside the machine tore like a thunderbolt. With the utmost difficulty Frank kept from running into some of the trees.

The outlaws on deck tried to force in the cabin doors. But they were of steel and stoutly resisted. By this time Frank saw a clear course before him and dared to leave the wheel long enough to liberate his companions.

Barney and Pomp quickly seized their rifles and thrust them through the loopholes. At this the outlaws, frantic with terror, leaped from the deck.

Going at that fearful rate of speed a leap from the deck of the vehicle was no light matter. It was likely that many of the villains were severely injured.

"Hurrah!" cried Stuart, "that was done very slick, Frank. You are a hero. But what will you do now?"

Frank had checked the speed of the machine, and was turning it about.

"I am going back to recover the stolen treasure," he declared.

"Good!" cried Stuart. "And we can do it, too!"

"I think we can."

"How did those rascals ever get the whip hand on us that way?"

"We were extremely careless. We should not have neglected to keep a sharp watch. But we'll not get caught that way again!"

"You are right!"

Back went the Detective on its course. Soon it had reached the scene of the train robbery.

The search-light swept the vicinity very thoroughly, but not a sign of the robbers could be seen; not one was in sight.

The nature of the region was such that they could slip into the deep woods and among the rocky crags, where the machine could not follow or hope to dislodge them.

This was unfortunate in the extreme. However, as thorough a search of the hills as possible was made, but without result.

The Hinkleys had actually got safely away with the treasure from the car, and left no clew behind them. Thus far the expedition of the Detective had been a rank failure.

Frank was discomfited but not beaten.

"They have given us a hard deal," he said, "but we'll get square with them yet!"

Daylight was now at hand, and with it came a wrecking train and a guard of Vigilantes from China City. The armed men leaped out of the cars, and their leader, at sight of the Detective, drew his men up to fire upon it.

But Stuart rushed out and shouted to them an explanation. Then a conference was held.

The result was that the Vigilantes spread into the hills while the Detective held guard below, hoping to drive the robbers out and then nab them.

But after a day's hard quest the search proved fruitless. Evidence was found that the outlaws had got away with their booty down the creek, in the direction of a frontier town known as Big Divide.

This was well known as a resort of toughs and desperadoes, and there was little doubt that the gang would there divide the spoils.

Then they would separate, as was the usual line of tactics after a big robbery, to come together again months later, after the detectives had been outwitted.

To reach Big Divide then before the gang could separate and escape, was the proper plan. So arrangements were at once made.

The machine was to go ahead as rapidly as possible and corral the robbers. Then the Vigilantes, armed with the law, were to arrive on the scene as quickly as possible.

Captain Odell and four of his men were to go aboard the Detective and represent the law. So the start was made.

It was fifty miles to Big Divide, and the Prairie Pirates had had ample time to get there.

The Detective could make the run easily in three hours. It would take the Vigilantes at least ten hours.

Soon the machine was speeding away like a meteor over the level plain.

Captain Odell and his men were eager to reach the frontier town and get their clutches upon the robbers. Frank put on all speed.

It seemed an age before the three hours began to draw to a close. Then far out on the prairie they saw a rude collection of adobe buildings.

It was hard to understand to what Big Divide owed its existence. Why it had been built out here in this open desolate spot was a problem.

It was in the first place a convenient rendezvous for the great gangs of cowboys who every season rounded up about there. From that it grew into a meeting place for gamblers, robbers and all the worst elements of prairie life.

Any unsuspecting traveler who happened to descend upon Big Divide was lucky indeed if he escaped with a whole skin.

As the machine now approached the Divide it could be seen that the place was in something of a state of excitement.

Mounted men were dashing about and one of the streets could be seen to be barricaded.

"What does that mean?" exclaimed Jim Stuart.

"It means that they are expecting us," said Captain Odell, grimly.

"We have got to have a bit of a ruction with them!"

"Bejabers, I hope we will!" cried Barney. "Shure we'd give them all they want aw that, I think."

Everybody agreed with the Celt. They took their stations at the loopholes in the netting and watched the progress of affairs.

Very rapidly the machine now drew nearer to the town. Straight on Frank ran until he was within hailing distance of the barricade.

Behind this was the roughest aggregation of men ever seen. They brandished their weapons and yelled furiously as the machine appeared.

The Detective remained before the barricade for some time before the din subsided sufficiently to admit of a parley. Then Odell acted as spokesman.

"Who is the leading spirit out there?" he shouted.

"We're all leading spirits," yelled one of the gang.

"Down with the Vigilantes!"

"Hang 'em!"

"Shoot 'em!"

Then a tall, desperate-looking fellow leaped upon the barricade and shouted:

"I'm 'Frisco Jim an' I'm ther high-cock-of-ther-walk here. What have ye got ter say to me?"

"All right, 'Frisco," said Odell. "I am High Sheriff of this locality and I am after the Hinkley Brothers. Are they or any of their gang here?"

"No!" was the defiant reply.

"We have tracked them here."

A mad yell went up.

"Wall, if they are here they ain't goin' to surrender! High Sheriff or not, you hed better go on about your business! Divide ain't no place fer you!"

"Oh, you think so, do you?" cried the sheriff; "we'll see. I demand that you give the Hinkleys up to the law. If you don't we'll batter down every building in this town and hang every man of you!"

This threat was too much for the denizens of Divide. They instantly opened fire on the Detective.

"That is enough," cried Odell, angrily; "there is only one way to deal with them! Give it back to 'em!"

So the fire was returned.

With their Winchesters those on board the Detective could pour a murderous fire into the midst of the outlaws.

And so the battle opened. It raged for a while with great fury.

Of course Frank could have opened fire with the big guns and reduced everything about to powder. But he was averse to this, for it meant wholesale slaughter.

Moreover it was his belief that after the foe had stood the fire of the Winchesters a while, they would be over glad to surrender, or come to terms.

Moreover, in course of time the rest of the Vigilantes would arrive and then an attack could be planned from the rear.

As it was, the bullets of the Divide people could do the party aboard the machine no harm whatever. This fact finally became apparent to them.

They at once changed their tactics.

Firing almost ceased, and finally the ruffian who claimed to be their leader, appeared once more on the barricade with a flag of truce.

"Well?" asked Odell as he opened the parley. "What do you want?"

"We want tew know what kind of a condemned prairie schooner have yew got thar? We kain't shoot through it!"

"Of course you can't," retorted the sheriff; "it is of steel!"

"Steel?"

"Yes, and what is more we have a dynamite gun here which if we chose to use it would blow you into perdition."

"Why don't ye use it?" sneered the wretch.

"We don't want to kill ail of you. We want simply to get our hands onto the Hinkleys and to compel them to give up that hundred thousand dollars they robbed the train of at China City!"

"Oh, you do, eh?" yelled the ruffian. "Wall, you'll have to want. Ther Hinkleys are here, an' we've taken keer of the hundred thousand. As fer yer dynamite gun, blow away an' be hanged!"

With this he disappeared.

Frank shrugged his shoulder.

Then he went forward.

"What are you going to do, Frank?" asked Stuart.

"Nothing much!" said the young inventor. "I'm only going to teach those scamps a bit of a lesson."

With which he placed a shell in the dynamite gun and trained it upon the barricade.

CHAPTER XII.

WHICH ENDS THE TALE.

FRANK READE, JR., was dead in earnest in his purpose. He very carefully sighted the gun.

He believed he could destroy the barricade without killing many of the people behind it.

He selected the center of the barricade as the objective point. Then he sighted the gun and discharged it.

The shell struck full in the midst of the barricade. The result was thrilling to witness.

There was a tremendous roar and a mighty upward burst of flame and smoke.

The ground trembled as with an earthquake shock. When the smoke and dust cleared a mighty hole was seen to have been blown in the ground big enough to bury the machine.

And the defenders of the barricade were scurrying for their lives in all directions.

Some of them had been killed or wounded in the explosion. But the number was not great.

In a few moments every outlaw or tough was out of sight. In the sheerest of terror they had sought refuge in every building or hiding place about.

Frank could have kept on in his deadly work and have destroyed every building in the place, and for that matter, every person as well. This fact had become patent to the desperadoes.

They were of a class which, once mastered, were always subdued. No further resistance was thought of.

Odell was astounded.

"Whew!" he exclaimed. "You have tamed them this time for sure. They won't dare make another fight."

"Now the question is," cried Frank, "how are we going to find the Hinkleys and recover the money?"

"I think the Hinkleys are in that building yonder," said Jim Stuart, indicating a long, rambling, adobe structure. "I think I saw them rush in there."

"Go for it then!" cried Odell.

Frank ran the machine up to the entrance of the building. Then Odell shouted:

"We will give you three minutes to produce the Hinkleys dead or alive! If you refuse, we will blow you all up!"

One of the windows of the place flew open, and a voice shouted:

"Do ye mean that, strangers?"

"You may be sure we do!"

"Then we'll agree to it, if ye'll keep away from Divide with that ere concern of yours!"

"That is a bargain," said Odell. "We want the two men and the money."

"Kain't give ye the money, as it's all scattered amongst the men."

"Well, give us the Hinkleys then."

"All right."

This announcement was followed by the sounds of a terrific fight in the building.

Shots were fired, curses were heard, and finally the door was burst open, and a crowd of rough men surged out.

In their midst were the two outlaws securely bound. Odell and his four men leaped down and secured the prisoners.

They brought them aboard the machine. Then Frank brought the Detective round and started to leave the town.

It was easy to assume that the denizens of Divide drew a deep breath of relief when the Detective vanished from view on the prairie horizon.

Ten miles on the return route the Vigilantes were met.

Most of the men were for hanging the Hinkleys at once, but Frank objected to this.

"It is better to take them back to Paradise Lost and give them a fair trial," he said. "Of course, there is no doubt of their guilt."

"That is right," agreed Odell, "it is well to observe the law, and they shall have justice."

So the party kept on for Paradise.

Goff and Tad Hinkley were at length in limbo. Bound hand and foot they were carefully guarded by two of the Vigilantes.

There seemed small chance for their escape. And thus the return to Paradise was made.

The trip to Texas had been much of a success after all. This certainly could not be denied.

The next day the Detective rolled down the mountain trail into Paradise.

It is impossible to describe the scene which followed.

As soon as the miners learned of the capture of the Hinkleys and that they had been brought to Paradise for trial their joy knew no bounds.

Frank Reade, Jr., and his companions became the heroes of the hour.

No time was lost in calling the tribunal of justice. Keno Jim's services were once more called into requisition.

The trial was very brief.

The weight of evidence was preponderous against the prisoners. Their lawyer could make absolutely no defense.

So the jury of miners brought in a speedy decision of guilty. Then Keno Jim pronounced the sentence.

"The prisoners at the bar, Goff and Tad Hinkley, are found guilty of the charges against them," he declared; "so I will pronounce sentence. Both shall die of hanging by the neck to-morrow morning at sunrise from the limb of the biggest pine on our hills."

"Hurrah!" wildly shouted the spectators, breaking the rules of the court. And they cheered themselves hoarse.

The prisoners were deadly pale.

It was evident that they realized that their fate was sealed. But yet they did not plead for mercy.

For they knew full well that it would be useless. But it was noticed that they exchanged significant glances as their doom was pronounced.

The sequel of this came quickly.

When the prisoners were led from the court-room to the little jail, Goff Hinkley was attended by a giant miner on his right.

In the miner's belt was an arsenal of weapons. The prisoner's hands were not bound, as it did not seem possible that they could escape.

But suddenly, swift as a flash, Goff Hinkley grasped the butt of one of the pistols.

He twiched it from the other's belt like a flash and leaped to one side. A snarling cry like that of a maddened wolf escaped his lips.

Thunderstruck, the crowd for a moment swayed back. A hundred revolvers covered the highwayman.

But he did not heed this.

"Shoot!" he yelled, with the fury of a madman. "A Hinkley is not afraid to die. Curse ye, all of ye! I wish I had the power to drain your life's blood!"

"Put down that weapon, Goff Hinkley!" said the tall miner, sternly. "You cannot escape. We've all got ther drop on ye."

"I cannot escape?" shouted the highwayman. "That is false! This very weapon is my means. Tad!"

"Goff! do not be afraid!"

The other brother had shouted these last words. The next instant Goff Hinkley fired the revolver point blank at his brother.

Tad Hinkley fell back with the blood spurting from his heart. Then, before the astounded bystanders could recover from their surprise, Goff Hinkley placed the weapon to his head.

"Stop him!" yelled Odell.

Too late.

Crack!

The bullet went crashing through his brain. He fell a corpse. The career of the Hinkley Brothers was ended. The Prairie Pirates would never more terrorize the plains of Texas.

The wonderstruck crowd gathered about the two dead outlaws. Then they slowly dispersed.

"After all," said Frank Reade, Jr., "it was the best thing that could be done. They can do no more harm now and their blood is upon their own heads."

"That is true," agreed Stuart.

They went back aboard the Detective. Then a consultation was held.

"Well, Mr. Stuart," said Frank, "we have accomplished the object of our trip to Texas."

"You are right, Frank," agreed the detective. "And do you know I am sorry that it is over."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, for I fear that it means our separation. I have enjoyed my travel on board the Detective."

"The trip has been exciting and enjoyable," agreed Frank, "but all things come to an end."

"Oh, that is true! What will your plans be now?"

"Well, I have thought of continuing the trip as far as Tucson. Thence we will strike north to Salt Lake City."

"Through the Great Basin?"

"Yes."

"And then——"

"Home."

The detective drew a deep breath.

"How long will that take you?" he asked.

"Two months or more!"

"Ah, of course our contract ended with the defeat of the Prairie Pirates."

"Well, yes."

Stuart fidgeted around a bit. Frank read his mind like a printed book and smiled.

"Of course," said the detective slowly. "I—er—that is, I think I have earned a vacation. I would like to take that trip with you, Frank, if you'll take me!"

"Would you really?"

"Yes."

"Very well!" agreed the young inventor. "Your offer is accepted. I am glad that you have decided to accompany us!"

The detective sprang to his feet.

"Do you mean that?" he cried.

"Every word of it."

"How can I thank you enough?"

"It is nothing."

"Oh, it will be a jolly trip!" and Stuart went out to tell Odell and Keno Jim of his luck.

The machine remained in Paradise a week.

During that time the voyagers were lionized and treated handsomely by the people. It was with regret that they were finally compelled to leave.

But one day they went aboard the Detective and took their leave of Paradise Lost and also of Texas.

A few days later they were in the wilds of Arizona chasing and being chased by the Apache.

As the incidents of that trip would fill another book, we cannot give them here.

Our story ends with the termination of the Trip to Texas and the end of the Prairie Pirates.

But the machine kept on from Tucson up through the region of the Great Basin, and finally over the Rockies to Salt Lake.

Here they created a sensation among the Mormons. Everywhere they went they were well received.

Many thrilling adventures and pleasant experiences were had. But we cannot give them here.

At Salt Lake Frank chartered a special train and took the Detective back to Readestown.

It would never be possible to take another trip in her, for the wear and tear of her machinery had been great.

So Frank broke her up for old iron. But he said:

"I will build another to beat her. I can make an improvement on her, I think."

"When you get the new machine finished maybe I'll have another case for you!" said Jim Stuart. "Would you undertake another?"

"We will decide when the time comes!" replied Frank; "for the present I have had enough of travel."

Jim Stuart went back to St. Louis and resumed his detective duties, but he will never forget that trip with Frank Reade, Jr., to Texas in quest of the Prairie Pirates.

He often hears from Colonel Alden and Alice, who are yet at the Double Star Ranch. They are untiring in their gratitude to Frank Reade, Jr.

Barney and Pomp went back to their duties at the machine shops with a relish. But they are quite ready for another tour.

And Frank Reade, Jr., meditates another at no very distant day. Until such time let us patiently wait.

[THE END.]

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